

FIRST TOLD AS A GHOST STORY ON THE SHORES OF LAKE Geneva in 1816, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, the gothic horror tale that would become her most famous novel, was written in answer to a challenge made by the poet Lord Byron.

Mary Shelley was eighteen years old at the time and spending a rainy summer in Switzerland with her future husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The couple frequently visited Lord Byron, who was working on the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and read German ghost stories with him to pass the time. When Byron proposed a competition to see who among them could write the most frightening supernatural tale, Mary Shelley took the wager. The result was her novel *Frankenstein*.

Shelley's story was inspired by a "waking dream" she describes in a preface to the 1831 edition of the book: "I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion." Shelley envisioned a creature constructed from "charnel house scraps" and brought to life through a secret science. She writes that she wanted to write a story to "frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night!"

A new exhibition by ALA, the American Library Association, and NLM, the National Library of Medicine, explores the literary, scientific, and cultural legacy of Shelley's novel. "Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature" examines Mary Shelley's world, the evolution of the monster as a cultural myth, and the novel's relevance to current bioethical dilemmas. With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the exhibition will make its way to eighty libraries across the country between October 2002 and December 2005.

One of the goals of the exhibition is to encourage people familiar with the popular image of *Frankenstein* to read Shelley's novel. "We'd like people to understand the original book as totally different from what's been done with plays and films," says ALA project coordinator Susan Brandehoff.

Since it was first published anonymously in 1818, *Frankenstein* has been printed in more than four hundred editions and has undergone evolutions of meaning and interpretation. Universal Picture's 1931 film adaptation, with Boris Karloff portraying the monster, set a standard. Karloff's name became associated with the word "Frankenstein," adding to the confusion between the name of the scientist, Victor Frankenstein, and the name of his creation. In Shelley's novel the being is left nameless, known simply as the "monster" or the "creature." The monster called "Frankenstein" in the 1931 film also lacks the intelligence, moral character, and emotional complexity of the ultimately human monster dreamed up by Mary Shelley.

Set in the icy waters of the polar north, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a tale within a tale. On a voyage of scientific exploration, Robert Walton comes across the half-dead Victor Frankenstein and pulls him aboard his vessel. Frankenstein recounts a nightmarish tale of having created a monster that caused destruction and murdered Frankenstein's fiancée and a friend. Walton learns that Frankenstein is now searching for the monster, intent on destroying it in retribution, but the scientist demonstrates no sense of responsibility for what he has set in motion. As soon as he has finished telling the story, Frankenstein dies.

Immediately afterward, the monster himself boards the ship and tells the captain that he regrets his actions—but his apology is too late for Victor Frankenstein to witness. The creature tells Walton it sought affection, but its appearance inspired revulsion in everyone it met. "Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings, who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent

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qualities which I was capable of unfolding. . . . But now crime has degraded me beneath the meanest animal. No guilt, no mischief, no malignity, no misery, can be found comparable to mine. . . . [T]he fallen angel becomes a malignant devil." The novel concludes with the creature saying he will build a funeral pyre and immolate himself. He disappears, "lost in darkness and distance."

Frankenstein is Shelley's first novel. "It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing," she once wrote. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died in childbirth, leaving her a legacy of feminist writings such as *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which Shelley said she read again and again.

Her father, the political writer and social reformist William Godwin, saw to it that his daughter read the classics and studied French and Latin. It was in her father's London home that Mary met the writers Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles and Mary Lamb, and the politician Aaron Burr. Scientists, including the physician Erasmus Darwin, father of Charles, and chemists Humphrey Davy and William Nicholson,

also frequented the Godwin home. Diary entries from the period during which she was writing *Frankenstein* reveal that Shelley was gathering scientific background for the novel by reading Davy's *Elements of Chemical Philosophy*. An influential scientist of the day, Davy worked with galvanism, the science of healing and rekindling life via electrical current.

Galvanism is named for the Italian anatomist Luigi Galvani, who discovered that bioelectric forces exist within living tissue. Demonstrations were carried on in the early nineteenth century by Luigi's nephew Giovanni and were popular in both Europe and England. "The Prince and Princess of Wales attended such a demonstration in 1804, involving not just animals, but the decapitated heads of people who had been executed," says Susan Lederer, exhibition curator and professor of the history of science at Yale University. "These were very public demonstrations—social events with scientific content."

Mary Shelley had a lifelong interest in science and kept current with the leading theories and experiments of the nineteenth century. Although Victor

Frankenstein's method of making the creature is not detailed in the novel, Shelley describes Victor's fascination with electricity and refers to his infusion of "a spark of being into the lifeless thing."

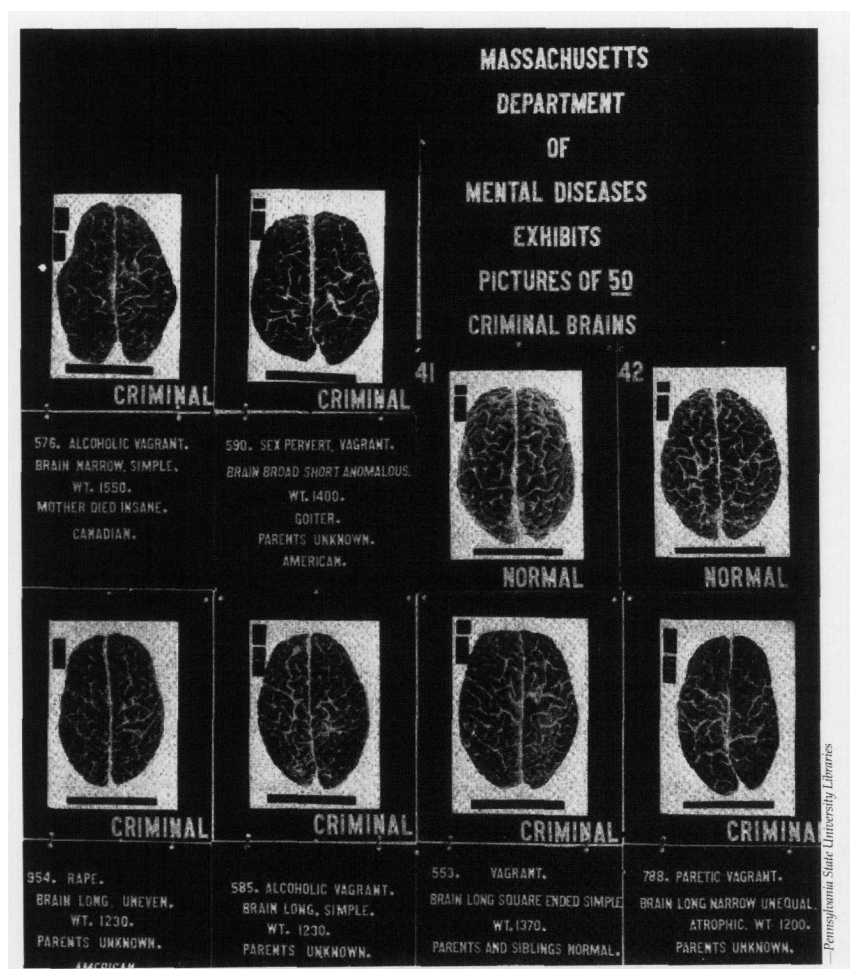
"Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated," she writes in the 1831 preface to the novel. "Galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth." During the summer of 1816, she, Byron, and Shelley speculated about Darwin and his search for the origins of cellular life, and "the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated."

In the nineteenth century, scientific probing of the limits of life and death belied optimism about discovering the secrets of immortality. "The possibility itself was much more pleasing than I think it would be for people at the end of the twentieth century," says Lederer.

When it was first published, critics held that *Frankenstein* presented a negative view of science. According to Betty Bennett, the exhibition's literary consultant, the interpretation of the book's use and treatment of science has since changed. "The book is not a warning against science at all," she says. "Mary Shelley used science as a metaphor for any kind of irresponsible action and what she really was concerned with was the politics of the era and the way the monarchy was operating in the interest of relatively few people."

Shelley's intentions were not lost on political cartoonists of her time. *Frankenstein* was repeatedly used as a metaphor to warn against unchecked political forces. "In the nineteenth century, the very word 'Frankenstein' could be wielded to represent issues and people considered to be out of control," writes Lederer in the exhibition catalog. Reproductions from the British publication *Punch*, which are included in the exhibition, demonstrate the story's use as a political analogy. An 1854 cartoon portrays Tsar Nicholas I as the "Russian Frankenstein," creator of a military monster in the Crimean War, while John Tenniel comments on the Irish working class by depicting Nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell as the "Irish Frankenstein" in his 1882 cartoon.

Mary Shelley's interest in politics was partially fostered by the writings of her mother, says Bennett. Wollstonecraft's work left its mark on Shelley's political views, including her distaste for governments that did not benefit most people. "She was antimonarchy, but



Reproduction of the exhibition display "Massachusetts Department of Mental Diseases Exhibits Pictures of 50 Criminal Brains" from the Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

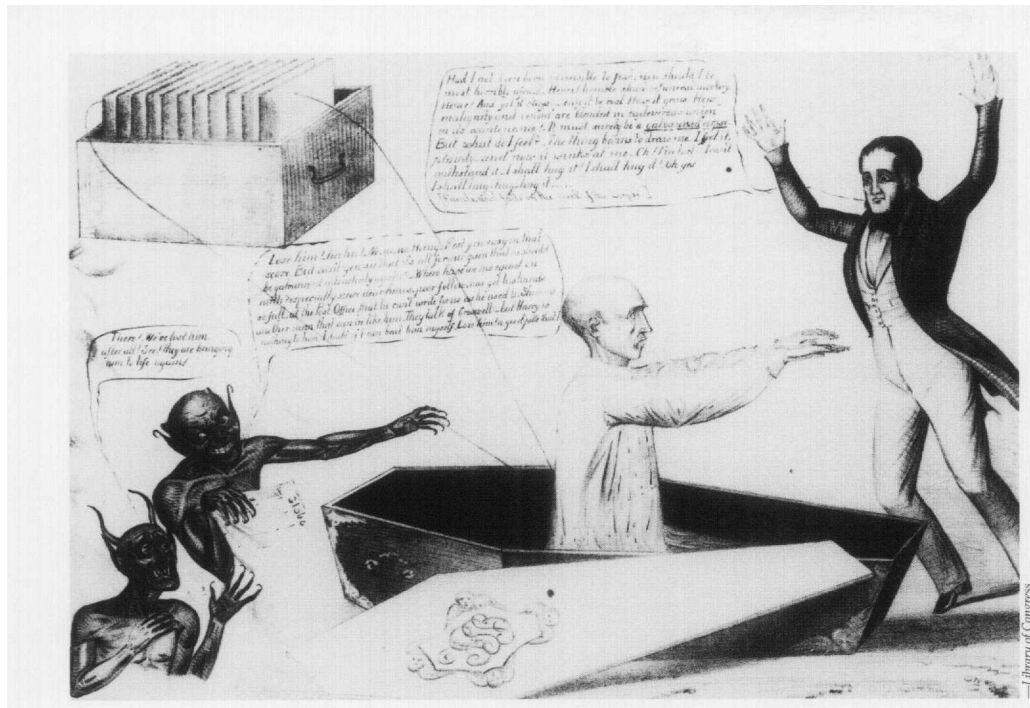


Illustration of Victor Frankenstein in his laboratory, by Henry Fuseli, 1789.

mostly she was anti-any governing power that had absolute control," says Bennett. "She believed in universal love. She believed people should care about each other and that governments should care about their people."

The theme of civic responsibility in *Frankenstein* begins with the book's subtitle, "the Modern Prometheus." In the Greek myth, Prometheus steals fire from the gods for the benefit of mankind. As punishment, he is chained to a rock where every day an eagle consumes his liver. Prometheus's defiance combines arrogance towards the divine with benevolence towards humanity. Shelley's subtitle is ironic: Victor Frankenstein may also be in search of God-like secrets and claim only the best intentions, but his actions are corrupt and he dies without acknowledging his role in the destruction that has occurred.

A central concern of *Frankenstein* is the scientist's shirking of responsibility for the creature he has created. "Shelley underscores the self-centeredness of those who have power like Victor Frankenstein," says Bennett. "He's narcissistic, he's really hungry for self-aggrandizement." In one incident, the housekeeper Justine is hanged after being convinced by a priest that she has murdered her young charge, William. Victor Frankenstein knows that his creature has committed the act, yet for reasons of self-preservation he remains silent and allows Justine to be put to death.

It is the monster, not the remorseless scientist, who experiences a series of personal transformations. Initially the monster seeks out human companionship and love,

and turns to murder only after being abandoned by his creator. According to Bennett, the monster's journey reflects Shelley's thoughts on human nature. "She believed that people were inherently good, but that corrupt social systems corrupt people," she explains.

Like the original novel, the 1931 film version was influenced by the science of its day. Eugenics, the study of human improvement based on the belief that genetics dictates personality and morals, gained popularity in the 1920s. The flat-headed hulking giant portrayed by Boris Karloff is given the brain of a criminal to account for his murdering ways. Visitors to the *Frankenstein* exhibition can view the "Poster of Brains of Criminals," illustrated by Harry H. Laughlin for the Second International Exhibition of Eugenics in 1921. The poster was used to demonstrate the physical differences between "normal" and "criminal" brains.

The exhibition will be accompanied by lectures, group readings, and mini-courses, often in collaboration with local universities and colleges. Brandehoff says that enthusiasm for the project has produced creative and unusual programming. One library will commission a cantata using text from the novel as lyrics. Another plans to stage a reading of *Presumption*, one of the first stage adaptations of the book. Still another will host a poetry slam on the themes of identity and perception, entitled "Am I the Monster?"

"I think that the popular culture story of *Frankenstein* can really be reduced to two simple sentences," says Lederer, "It's

alive' and 'It's escaped.' I think those are the two key features of the myth—you've created something, new life, but you cannot control it."

The *Frankenstein* metaphor continues to play a role in current scientific debates. In 1984, Baby Fae survived just over a month after receiving a transplanted baboon heart. In 1997, Scottish scientists announced that they had successfully cloned an adult sheep. Speculation about whether human cloning is on the horizon and what that might mean for our understanding of human life and individuality has sparked public debate about the limits of science and its regulation. Genetically altered plants and food, which are referred to as "Frankenfoods" and "Frankenfarms," have captured public attention.

"We, as a society, are faced with engineering life on a scale that Mary Shelley couldn't even conceive of," Lederer says, adding that the *Frankenstein* myth endures because of its ability to help people voice their concerns about new technologies. In conjunction with the exhibition, public debates between academics with differing views on biomedical research will provide a forum for participants to express their concerns. Discussions such as "The Frankenstein Metaphor and Twenty-first Century Science," examining the novel's implications for modern science, will involve academics, medical professionals, and library participants.

"In our modern era, we have major issues of responsibility and those issues are not only issues of cloning, but issues of government," says Bennett. "So the book has come to be understood and respected from those points of view."

Lederer hopes that audiences will use the exhibition as an opportunity to explore the broader questions of power and responsibility that Shelley originally intended. "Is there a way that we can promote the kinds of discussions that will help us to express the kind of society we want to achieve?" she asks. "Mary Shelley gave us a blueprint for one that's gone wrong. How can we find the blueprint for one that's going to go right?" □

Tina Pamintuan is a writer in Washington, D.C. The American Library Association has received \$300,000 in NEH support for the traveling exhibition "*Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature*" which opens in October at the National Library of Medicine in Washington, D.C., and will visit eighty libraries across the country.